

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 35.

NEWSWEEK
15 June 1981

The Strange Case Of Chris Cooke

Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger was surprised when he read his Monday morning newspaper last week. He knew that a Titan-missile launch officer named Christopher M. Cooke, 25, had been confined for making three unauthorized visits to the Soviet Embassy in Washington, forcing the Air Force to change Titan launching procedures in case top-secret information had already fallen into Soviet hands. But the newspapers told Weinberger something he didn't know: that Justice officials had decided not to press espionage charges against Cooke. Weinberger promptly called Attorney General William French Smith who agreed to take another look at the case. But there was little he could do. The Air Force, by independently promising Cooke immunity from prosecution in exchange for his cooperation, may have short-circuited any possibility that Cooke would ever be brought to trial as a spy.

Weinberger's concern was understandable. At Cooke's fingertips in the huge underground Titan-missile complex near Wichita, Kans., were nuts-and-bolts documents on the nation's biggest missile. By knowing the number of digits in the Titan-launch code and other information, the Soviets could conceivably broadcast authentic-sounding launch orders, thus confusing missile crews and delaying any retaliatory strike. Even more valuable would be the Titan-maintenance schedules, which could help the Soviets target active missiles in a surprise attack. Although such data would offer the Soviets only minimal advantage, Air Force officials hastily changed procedures.

Cooke was unknown to the authorities when he made his first embassy visit in December and was routinely photographed along with all other visitors. The FBI didn't begin to single out Cooke until after his second visit that same week. Cooke's car had broken down, NEWSWEEK learned, and he made the mistake of calling his father in Richmond, Va., from the Russian Embassy. The call was traced, and by March the FBI had closed in on Cooke. Between then and Cooke's third embassy visit in

May, the FBI turned the case over to the Air Force Office of Special Investigation. Cooke's access to classified information was restricted and investigators, in their zeal to assess the damage done, promised Cooke he would not be prosecuted if he cooperated. The offer probably was a mistake: officials say Cooke did not cooperate fully, but the initial promise may still preclude any future espionage charges.

Why Cooke would even approach the Soviets baffled authorities. For his trouble, Cooke apparently got little more than a small amount of money and some information from the Soviets. One military official suggested that Cooke, who holds a master's degree in political science, merely "wanted to establish his bona fides so he could collect information he could use in his writings"—which in the past reflected a consuming interest in nuclear weaponry, the subject of his 1979 master's thesis and of a 1978 newspaper guest editorial. Cooke also had a long-standing interest in the world of espionage: he had twice applied unsuccessfully to the CIA and had partially filled out a third application last February after his Soviet contacts had been established. But without a full-fledged Justice Department inquiry, investigators may never learn what Christopher Cooke was up to—or why.

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